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# SEEKING UNITY DESPITE DIFFERENCES: FEMALE MUSLIM COLLEGE STUDENTS AND CULTURAL BRIDGES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Toqa Hassan, The University of Akron

## ABSTRACT

*Through the lens of co-cultural and social construction of reality, this research explores the impact of social media on the lives of female Muslim college students in the United States. Two research questions were posed: 1) How social media allows female Muslim college students to bridge the gap between minority groups in their communities and 2) How do they perceive the presence of diversity among themselves online and offline. Results of 11 semi-structured interviews showed that social media allows female Muslim college students to unite with others globally and expand their local circle of friends to grow beyond their socially constructed boundaries. Participants shared their ability to connect with other Muslim women with similar interests and ideas. Despite their claim of the lack of representation of diversity online, some reported seeing an improvement in recent online content. Participants indicated that diversity is not favored in real life as it is favored online. Suggested future studies may seek to understand how female Muslim college students communicate as a minority in the US.*

**Keywords:** *Co-cultural theory, social construction theory, Female Muslim, college students, women, colorism, social media, & minority*

## INTRODUCTION

Although issues involving diversity and Muslims women (Khan & Zahra, 2015) have become popular topics of discussion in the United States, they are not spoken about enough within the Muslim community (Grewal, 2009). The United States of America has been coined the mixing pot due to its diverse population. This diversity exponentially increases when looking at the Muslim population in the United States due to Islam's global society as a religion practiced in all countries around the world (Desilver & Masci, 2017). As such, all Muslims look different from each other. Upon entering a mosque in the US, the differences in languages, looks, clothing styles, and traditions are obvious. Like many individuals around the world and in the US, Muslims use social media to post, share, comment, follow, and communicate with other users online. Specifically, female Muslim college students (henceforward referred to as "Muslim women") have

gained attention for their social media presence due to sharing their passions about activism, Muslim fashion, their ethnicities, and voicing many of their interests.

As Muslim women use social media sites, they are given a medium that has not been granted to them through traditional media (McKelvy & Chatterjee, 2016). Social media allows them to follow and stay up to date with their favorite ethnic and Islamic brands, products, and celebrities. Moreover, as they use social media, they partake in an online culture (Kavakci & Kraeplin, 2017) that gives them the freedom to express all their cultural, traditional and religious beliefs, openly and unapologetically. As social media users, Muslim women with access to Islamic culture coupled with Western culture begin to have dual interests, leading them to have complex perspectives (Rashid, 2017) on who they are and where they stand in their communities.

The purpose of the study is to understand how Muslim women living in the US view diversity amongst themselves offline and how they are using social media to increase that diversity and use it as a bridge to connect with other Muslims in the global Muslim community. As such, the primary objective of this research is to understand how Muslim women in the West are using social media in order to bridge the gaps that are found in their offline local Muslim communities. Specifically, the study aims to uncover how the actions of Muslim women differ in real life compared to their online behaviors. For that purpose, the study is grounded in Orbe's (1998a) Co-Cultural Theory in order to understand which actions are used to obtain which outcomes. Additionally, Berger and Luckmann's (1966) theory of social construction of reality is utilized to observe the actions of Muslim women, who are unique individuals with different backgrounds, lifestyles, and cultures.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

With Muslims making up twenty-five percent of the world's population (Pew Research Center, 2017), the population of Muslims in the United States is varied due to the diversity of the United States as a country. As Muslims migrated to the US from their numerous countries, they added more value to the *mixing pot*. The Muslim population in the United States is made up of individuals from the Middle East, North Africa, Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, South America, and Europe (Pew Research Center, 2017). Individuals come to the US along with their traditions, including cultural practices, clothing styles, cuisine, and ideologies. Their beliefs are made up of religious and culturally hegemonic ideologies. Foss (2009) defines an ideology as a system of beliefs, values or ideas that is accepted by individuals without the knowledge, awareness, and comprehension to the original meaning of those values. Ideology is "a cultural group's perceptions about the way things are and assumptions about the way they ought to be" (Sellnow, 2017, p. 304). The study specifically looks at the similar ideologies between Muslims and non-Muslims in the US, such as issues of racism and colorism. Coupling these concepts with the use of social media and how it empowers and impacts Muslim women who are living in the US.

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## Colorism

Since Islam spans all continents of the world, Muslims do not all look one specific way (Shah, 2017). Additionally, with issues of representation of non-White colored individuals in traditional media, it is important to understand the previous research that has been conducted to understand if colorism is apparent on social media and if it influences women users. Colorism, as defined by Walker (2011), is the “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (p. 272). Although no previous research was found focusing directly on the concept of colorism within the Muslim community, a variety of studies have been conducted to understand the impact of colorism on other minority groups (Mbure & Aubrey, 2017; Jha & Adelman, 2008; and Chaves-Dueñas, Adames & Organista, 2014).

As the following research suggests, skin tones are an important aspect of beauty around the world. The pattern of assigning status based on skin tone was established by British colonialism, as Mbure and Aubrey (2017) contend. The findings of their “content analysis of cosmetic advertisements in British and Kenyan women’s lifestyle magazines from 1955 to 1975” suggested that Eurocentric beauty ideals originated during the colonial period (p. 339). After the colonial period ended, the same patterns of skin tone ideals remained consistent and were observed in Kenyan models as stated in their recent study (Mbure & Aubrey, 2017). Additionally, the manifestation of lighter skinned models seen in the 1955-1975 magazines suggested “a light skin ideal for Kenyan magazines” (p. 351).

Along with Kenya, India was also under the European colonial powers. Jha and Adelman (2008) studied the skin tones of women on Indian matrimonial websites and found that dark-skinned females are rarely selected for marriage. One of the guiding research questions for their study was whether males on Indian matrimonial websites marry women with lighter skin tones than themselves (Jha & Adelman, 2008). Interestingly, the findings revealed that fair and very fair grooms married females of either lighter or similar complexions to themselves, while in only 4 cases did the fair grooms marry “women darker than them” (p. 15). The results of both studies (Mbure & Aubrey, 2017; Jha & Adelman, 2008) reveal the effects of colorism against women of color in non-White dominant countries around the world.

Just as Kenyans in Africa and Indians in Asia prefer the lighter skin tones, researchers Chaves-Dueñas, Adames and Organista (2014) found that Latino/as are aware of the bias in the skin-color hierarchy, however, they persist in preferring Whiteness. Specifically, the study includes comments that connote this, such as “we need to better the race by marrying a White individual” or “Oh! How pretty your daughter is, she’s so beautifully white,” and “Go into the shade [to avoid getting darker]” (p. 17). These statements, as the researchers note, are not unique to Latino/as since other groups use similar tactics and have parallel opinions regarding the significance of skin color (Chaves-Dueñas et al., 2014). Colorism is an important concept of this study in order to understand how Muslim women feel about skin tone as a first indicator of

difference and how they perceive this diversity is being accepted, encouraged, or challenged on social media.

### Theoretical Framework

The theory of social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998a) provide a theoretical framework and sensitizing concepts to guide the exploration of the ways Muslim women perceive diversity in their communities and how they use social media to bridge the gaps of differences. The combination of these two theories is unique in that they explain that co-cultural members are often marginalized and muted by the larger dominating societal structures but acknowledge that culture, although constructed, can be challenged and reconstructed, as well. The theories suggest that members of the co-cultural group construct their own meanings of reality (Orbe, 1998a) and use those meanings to communicate (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) within their co-cultural community and with the larger community. Thus, this framework is useful in order to offer further insight about how Muslim women in Western context, with the intersection of two cultural groups, construct and communicate their own meanings as a co-cultural group with other members in society.

**Co-cultural theory.** The coined term *co-cultural* refers to a group that has little to no say in creating the dominant structure of society. In his book *Constructing Co-Cultural Theory*, Orbe (1998a) explains that studying co-cultural communication sheds light on “how persons, marginalized in a dominant society, communicate with those who have direct access to institutional power” (p. 86). Orbe (1998b) explains that the dominant groups at the top of the social structure shape the language and communication system of the entire society. Thus, privileged groups are in control of the hegemonies that structure society. Littlejohn and Foss (2011) describe co-cultural theory as a framework that is created to provide an understanding for the communication behaviors of individuals with little power in society. As such, this theory specifically focuses on how the power structures affect communication between individuals of the dominant group and the co-cultural in-group members (Orbe, 2005; Bell et al, 2015).

Specifically, Orbe (1998a, 1998b) identifies the various strategies that individuals use to build connections, challenge stereotypes, or avoid the dominant group. As such, theory was a springboard for understanding the multiple ways that individuals “reinforce, manage, alter and overcome societal position that renders them outside the centers of power” (Orbe, 2005, p. 65). According to Bell et al. (2015), the goal of co-cultural theory is to understand how marginalized groups in society navigate and respond to oppressive challenges and societal structures. The theory states that co-cultural group members strategically enact communication practices such as confronting, censoring self, utilizing liaisons, and mirroring.

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## Social Construction of Reality

When Berger and Luckmann wrote their book *The Social Construction of Reality* in 1966, they combined aspects from the disciplines of sociology, philosophy, and communication into the concept of social construction as a theory. This theory revolves around the notion that knowledge arises as “a product of group and cultural life” (Littlejohn, Foss, Oetzel 2017, p. 9). Using this philosophy, knowledge is the result of meaningful interactions within social and cultural groups. Additionally, Littlejohn et al. (2017) state that this perspective holds that people cannot know something unless they verbally state it, making it explicitly concrete. Furthermore, this theory (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) fits within the interpretive paradigm in that theorists are interested in how each participant’s world develops, evolves, and emerges based on their personal experience and growth. The theory does not aim to change the behaviors of people, rather it aims to understand how individuals formulate meanings and use them as connotative definitions that define the meanings of their world.

According to Littlejohn, et al. (2017), Berger and Luckman initially wanted to understand how knowledge is constructed; however, communication scholars are more interested in studying the communication process behind the construction of knowledge. According to Leeds-Hurwitz (2009), in the communication field, the two most important elements are: “[first] the ... assumption that people make sense of experience by constructing a model of the social world and how it works and [second] the emphasis on language as the most important system through which reality is constructed” (p. 289). Moreover, Littlejohn et al. (2017) state that this theory explores how human knowledge is developed through interactions that lead to the formulations of meanings, specifically, observing how language and verbal interactions lead to the establishment of meanings and ideologies.

For this qualitative study, the two theories provide a theoretical framework to synthesize how Muslim women view diversity and how these views are formed. Additionally, the co-cultural theory serves as a lens to understand how Muslim women are interacting among themselves and with the dominant cultural groups on social media platforms. Utilizing these theories to understand how Muslim women use social media addresses the gap in knowledge and provide insight into how Muslim women utilize social media and how they perceive and negotiate their perceptions of diversity. Thus, the research questions guiding this study seek to understand Muslim women’s perceptions of diversity and differences amongst each other as well as how they use social media to connect with others who are different from themselves. Namely, the research questions are: 1) How does social media bridge the gap between minority groups in the Muslim community? And 2) How do Muslim women observe the presence of diversity amongst themselves?

## METHODOLOGY

Using the qualitative method of research was deemed the most effective approach to study this phenomenon as it privileges the lived experiences of Muslim women (Tracy, 2014) and provides in-depth answers to the research questions. Eleven Muslim women currently living in the United States were interviewed. The participants were strategically selected because they were Muslim women who have lived in the US for a period long enough to see and understand the racial differences and to be able to recognize instances of inclusion and diversity. Additionally, they were active social media users who are familiar with online content and standards. The following list explains the profiles of the participants:

- Firyal: 20-year-old. She was born in the United States to Palestinian parents.
- Leena: 33-year-old. She was born in Egypt to Egyptian parents.
- Afnan: 23-year-old. She was born in the US to White-American parents. She became Muslim when she converted to Islam at the age of 22.
- Ranna: 18-year-old. She was born in the US to Nigerian Parents.
- Anisa: 21-year-old. She was born in Guinea to Guinean parents.
- Huda: 18-year-old. She was born in the US to Indian parents.
- Deena: 18-year-old. She was born in the US to Palestinian parents.
- Jannah: 18-year-old. She was born in India to Indian parents.
- Noor: 18-year-old. She was born in Syria to Syrian parents.
- Manal: 28-year-old. She was born in Egypt to Egyptian parents.
- Tasnim: 22-year-old. She was born in Egypt to Egyptian parents.

Another unique aspect of the participants is that they are culturally diverse, which added a rich context to their experiences. Living in a Western world while practicing Islam, these women can recognize online and offline instances of prejudice, racism, and colorism. Additionally, being social media users, they are given opportunities to communicate, resist, or defy the societal norms that are present in their lives.

Following the approval of the Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited at a large Midwestern university in the US. The participants were also recruited from two mosques located in a midsize US Midwestern city. As needed, more women were enlisted for interviews through a snowball process as participants suggested other women to be interviewed (Tracy, 2013). Data for this study was collected over a period of three weeks. Furthermore, in order to protect the identity of all participants, pseudonyms were assigned to keep all names confidential.

A flexible interview guide allowed the participants to elaborate on their answers by asking for more context and explanations when needed. The interviews consisted of generative interview questions that are indirect and non-threatening questions that are the basis of the conversation (Tracy, 2013). The interview recordings were later transcribed and analyzed to help gather meaningful answers to the research questions. The participants of the study agreed to these terms

after reading and signing the participant consent form. The interviews were, then, held in a quiet and unobtrusive locations such as a library, a classroom, a mosque, and a coffee shop, where participants could feel comfortable to express their opinions and perceptions.

Living in a Western world while practicing Islam, these women can shed light on their everyday experiences at the intersection of their Islamic beliefs, values, and Western ideals and standards concerning diversity and inclusion. To come to these conclusions, interviews were analyzed using the methods outlined by Tracy (2013). The synthesizing concepts for this research were drawn from the theory of social construction of reality and co-cultural theory. Upon completion of the interview transcriptions, an emic approach to data analysis was used. Tracy (2013) argues that this approach requires the researcher to observe specific interactions, conceptualize general patterns based on the observations, then make cautious claims from the patterns and observations, and lastly draw a conclusion that creates a theme. This research approach was applied to analyze the interview results.

Additionally, the analysis was similar to that of McCracken (1988) such as important data was filtered from the non-important information given by the participants. For this study, important data was then analyzed and placed into six codes and then reanalyzed for second-level codes. This allowed the data to be explained, theorized and synthesized into two hierarchical codes, and placed into the categories, instances of unity and instances of exclusion. The categories and the results were the key points to allowing the themes to emerge from the data.

## FINDINGS

Two themes emerged from the Muslim women's responses: (1) uniting with Muslims globally, and (2) racism, colorism, and prejudice among Muslim women. The women shed light on how social media unites them with others across the world, with similar beliefs, opinions, backgrounds, and interests. Additionally, they spoke about instances of discrimination and prejudice that they as when they engage with other Muslims in their communities. However, they also mentioned situations when they were able to transgress cultural ideologies and bond with one another.

### Uniting with other Muslims Globally

The ability of Muslims using and controlling social media has opened many doors of opportunity, growth, and improvement for the Islamic *Ummah* (Arabic term for global Muslim community bound together by ties of faith) that have not been provided to them by any other means previously. Specifically, social media, which includes a wide variety of platforms, allows Muslims to openly present who they are to the world and for others to see and communicate with them.

Interestingly, only one woman, Afnan, stated that she creates YouTube videos. The videos give her the ability to actively portray both her faith and her American culture as she said, "I just talk about my experience with Islam and I try to relate it to the arts. So, I found a lot of comfort



with learning about Islam through literature, poetry, and learning from other converts.” Afnan also summarized how social media impacts her by saying that creating YouTube videos increases her confidence and makes her feel positive about herself. “I get a lot of good feedback,” she explained. Indeed, good feedback acts as a motivator for many of the women. Tasnim also mentioned that she manages a blog on Tumblr where she shares Islamic content. She elaborated, “the blog’s been running since 2012. It was exciting to share the gems I find online with the world. It was gaining lots of followers too, so there are people out there looking for this type of content.” Having these platforms accessible allows Muslim women to express what they value to the world and voice their opinions.

Not only does social media grant Muslims a media platform but it also allows for them to connect and to learn from other Muslims across the globe. More specifically, religious leaders such as teachers, lecturers, speakers, and A’immah (plural of *Imam*: a Muslim who leads other Muslims in Salah or preaches the message of Islam) who are also using social media to create awareness about Islam and Muslims. Tasnim explained that social media allowed her to become a stronger Muslim because of who she followed online. She stated, “I was very excited when I discovered the Muslim section on Instagram and then twitter and Tumblr. Seeing other popular Muslim leaders and teachers made me realize how deep and inspirational my faith is.” In return, this allow for Muslims to gain Islamic knowledge that is not accessible to them otherwise.

As Muslim women, all the participants except one stated that social media has improved their spiritualities and their religiosities. Anisa explained that after following many Islamic leaders on social media, “I was able to correct my behavior as a Muslim. I will “right” myself if I’m doing something wrong.” Moreover, Manal explained that social media “made me more aware of being Muslim. I care to stand out more as a Muslim in America.” Tasnim shared, “seeing other Muslims being Muslims unapologetically motivated me to do the same, express myself without fear.” Leena also mentioned that following Muslim speakers, “refreshed my spirituality because I watch reminder videos and Islamic videos daily.” Likewise, Firyal elaborated that she follows “Muslim activists that try to combat how the media usually portrays Muslims and Islam with a negative light, and I learn a lot from them.” On a similar note, Tasnim added, “I learned so much about the Hijab and the Qur’an and how to use that knowledge to inform others about the positives that Islam has to offer.” Social media has allowed Muslims to resist the stereotypes and demonstrate their faith with a more accurate image.

Social media also grants Muslims access to activists and leaders who are standing up for their faith as well as helping uplift other groups that are silenced and treated unfairly in the US. As such, Huda stated:

We see more underrepresented people on social media. You’ll see all different types of girls, black girls or Indonesian girls that are modeling for really tiny magazines and start up companies. But

because other people keep retweeting, and people keep lifting them up, so you see more of them. I personally like following these types of accounts because I get so excited when they show you other people's cultures in the right way.

Additionally, due to the political climate, many of the women shared that social media allows them to speak up and to stand out proudly amongst non-Muslims online. Tasnim shed light on conflicts that are happening in the Middle East:

Without social media, I wouldn't know that all of this was going on. I think I would be blind to so many details and differences that I wouldn't even be able to ask questions about issues and conflicts, like in Palestine, Syria, Iran, or Saudi Arabia, let alone speak about them and raise awareness to others around me. It [social media] exposes you to so many perspectives and opinions, and it's hard to form your own opinion, but it helps open your mind and gets you to start thinking.

Having been exposed to these activists, they are able to learn how to properly present themselves and to represent their faith, nationalities, and ethnicities, on social media and when communicating with others face-to-face.

Similarly, Firyal spoke about how, through social media, she was able to connect with others. "People know who I am since I advertise my faith and my culture and where I'm from. People know me without me needing to verbally tell them." Much like Firyal, Deena spoke about how social media influences her cultural identity as a Muslim Palestinian-American by saying, "it sparks my identity because a lot of Palestinians are activists online and they all come together to form marches and bring everyone together." Tasnim portrayed her emotions by saying, "I always get so excited when I join new platform and then find the Muslim community there. Like when I found the Muslim accounts on Instagram and Twitter, it was liberating to find people who are just like me." Additionally, Noor mentioned how "the Arab community online always sticks together, so it makes me feel more united. They talk about the same experiences and share the same jokes, even though we could all be from different countries." Having the option of communicating with others who share similar interests and struggles is a reason social media has become so highly integrated into the lives of many people today, as Deena mentioned in her interview, "imagine if there was no internet. How would people connect with each other? We wouldn't be able to know everything that we know. Everything would be so different because literally everything is online."

Additionally, the women also spoke about different influencers and content creators that they like to follow and stay up to date on. The accounts that were mentioned included personal accounts for certain YouTubers or Instagrammers, Muslim and non-Muslim accounts, Hijabi and

non-Hijabi accounts, makeup accounts, clothing and shopping accounts, and general accounts that are not specific towards one area but were generally aimed at Muslim-women as an audience.

Huda stated that her favorites are “two Hijabi girls. The first, her name is Putreeo. I really like her because she’s an edgier Hijabi; she tries to break stereotypes. I also like Dina Tokio because of how crazy and loud she is.” It is important to know that Putreeo is a Malaysian Youtuber while Dina Tokio is a British-Egyptian Youtuber, as well. Anisa also mentioned, “My favorite person on YouTube is Dina Tokio, I’ll watch her videos several times even if I’ve already seen it.” Jannah said, “I admire Glitter Beauty on Instagram. I love that she shares so many videos about other people’s work. I feel like I’m not just looking at her, I’m looking at other artists at the same time.” Deena mentioned that “there are some that I like their makeup, but some of them don’t wear Hijab and they’re not like religious. One of them is Saya, she’s a Pakistani Muslim. She’s really good so I’m always watching her videos.” Manal said that she likes “H&Y Modesty Collection on Instagram.” Firyal said, “I’m not a Hijabi but I love Hijabi accounts because they’re so beautiful. One of them is called Habiba Disilva, she’s half Brazilian half Arab.” Noor and Ranna said that they do not have a favorite account but Ranna said that she follows “Bomb Hijabis...an account on Snapchat run by a Muslim woman from Ohio and it features a different Muslim woman from all over the world every day. They show you their life and how they live and everything.”

Interestingly, social media allows for the women to learn and connect with other women, both Muslim and non-Muslim, on a globally diverse scale; an aspect that neither traditional media nor everyday face-to-face interactions provide. Tasnim added, “at social gatherings at the mosque, you’ll see groups of Arab women, groups of Indian/Pakistani women, groups of African women, but you wouldn’t really see all of these groups mixing often. It’s the exact opposite on social media.” Tasnim elaborated that this is the nature of human beings, “we tend to stick to those that are like ourselves but that’s not what Islam tells us to do. Social media brings us closer together with all of our differences and similarities.” The statements of these women suggest that social media allows them to break boundaries and be more humanly connected especially as individuals who are constantly encouraged by secular society to compete with each other (Traister, 2018).

### **Racism, Colorism, and Prejudice among Muslim Women**

It is true that today’s world is seeing a positive push towards inclusion and diversity as has been stated by many of the participants. However, it is important to note that many of the darker-skinned women saw a lack of diversity and a lack of acceptance of diversity both online and in the real world. Many of the women spoke about being at the mosques and feeling perceived as an *other* and treated as less than compared to the other women around them.

Many elaborated on how skin tone plays a large role in how a person is viewed and treated. The women who were very light-skinned wished to be darker and those who were dark-skinned wished to be lighter. While some admitted that they are happy with their skin, many claimed that

it makes them stand out and look different from those around them. Many of the women also talked about how skin tone is a significant identifier for beauty on social media.

Issues of race that also emerged included times when Muslim women who were darker-skinned were mistreated by other darker-skinned Muslims simply because of their nationality. Specifically, Ranna spoke about how African Muslims are often mistreated by African-American Muslims. “I see how we get looked at by the African-American women ... and even by other Muslims. It’s like just because you’re a certain race you think you’re better than people,” said Ranna. The actions referenced by Ranna might be true, but Tasnim added “I have seen many other cultural groups face similar prejudices.” She explained that in large Muslim gatherings, specifically in the West, that consist of groups of people from different countries and cultural backgrounds, “resentment can be seen from Pakistani women toward Arab women, African women towards African-American women, or Arab women toward African women, or European-Muslim women toward Convert-Revert women, and vice versa.” The antipathy and disliking of others based on their ethnicity or nationality is something that is, unfortunately, common amongst the Muslims who live in diverse communities in the West.

As a result, Huda mentioned that “Islam teaches us that the Muslim Ummah is equal. Sometimes you don’t feel like it is because I’ll be praying next to a Somalian woman and an Arab woman and I’ll get dirty stares.” Tasnim added, “Islam came with the purpose of defeating these norms, no one person is superior over another based on things that we can judge outwardly. Allah is the only One to judge us based on our sincerity and our faith.” Similarly, Anisa spoke about how the culture and traditions of African Muslims are often altered by African-American Muslims as they try to write and form their own narrative. She stated that “you don’t really see brands geared for Africans. Black converts are going into that but it’s weird because it’s not like how Africans dress. It’s awkward because it’s like American/African. It’s not the proper way of dressing for us.”

Anisa also spoke of modeling agencies that pose for different brands and products. She stated, “recently, they want a dark, dark complexion of people. They think ‘Hey, this person is darker, they’re much trendier’ type of thing.” Tasnim added that companies are also “using dark skinned models to make their products stand out and to show that they’re more inclusive and accepting. Part of me doesn’t think this entirely right, though, because it’s just trendy.” Meanwhile, Firyal added that diversity is presented on social media because “you’ll see many different colored models, they’ll arrange them from darker to dark, to light, to lighter, to show you that they are diverse.” Afnan noted that “the beauty standard is either being extremely light-skinned or extremely dark-skinned. Dark-skinned girls want to be lighter, or if you have very light skin you’re trying to be darker. You’re always kind of unhappy.”

On the other hand, it was surprising that other women spoke negatively about their own skin color. Interestingly, Ranna said, “the darker-skinned models that you see online have Eurocentric features, where they look a little bit Arab or they look more exotic than just plain. They’re not average looking like me.” In other words, dark-skinned women on social media with

a large following either have European or Caucasian features or they are very dark, while an average, moderately dark African skin tone is not seen as beautiful, and white or fair-skin is seen as the ideal and the most common. As a result, models that are not fair skinned are often not used when portraying women for brands on social media. Consequently, Ranna explained “when these Black Muslim women try to start their own Black Hijabi accounts, they [non-Blacks] will criticize them for dividing the Muslims but it’s because we’re not represented anywhere.” Although there are many Muslim women starting their own online businesses, this shows that they often receive negative feedback from other Muslims saying they are creating division among the Muslims, when they are seeking to be included.

The participants indicated that race was an extremely important topic when it comes to speaking about the Muslim community both online and offline. While speaking about their own skin tone, many of the women specified that sometimes they wished their skin colors would be different. Additionally, Jannah stated, “in India, they’re obsessed with light skin. Their culture teaches you that being lighter is prettier. If I grew up there, maybe I would want to be lighter, but here I don’t feel the need.” Tasnim indicated that there is a strong preference for lighter-skin tone in Egypt. “My uncle married a nomadic woman who was very dark-skinned, darker than Lupita Nyong’o, and some members of the family were really not happy about his decision,” she explained. Huda stated, “when it comes to beauty, it’s like ‘oh, these are the *darker* Muslims.’ The lighter ones are always preferred. So, when darker-skinned Muslims post, they get looked down upon. I thought we were all equal.” Noor said, “sadly, a white skin is the ideal,” with a disappointed tone.

## DISCUSSION

Through their lived experiences as active users on social media, Muslim women living in a Western society are exposed to many cultural practices in addition to the dominant culture and even their own traditions. According to the participants of this study, social media have only broadened their understanding of the world, their religion, who they are, and where they come from. This research study was designed to understand how Muslim women perceive the qualities that differentiate them from other women as well as to see if social media impacts these perceptions. Furthermore, the goal was to analyze if social media plays a role in guiding these women to expand beyond their social and cultural circles and connect with others who are different from themselves.

Through global teachers, local members, and online users, the women are constantly being exposed to agents of socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). These agents of socialization help the participants to constantly internalize the world in which they live. As a result, some of the women saw the need to speak out against injustice as they saw many others do so on social media. Meanwhile, other women were seeing content creators, influencers and trendsetters and they identified with them, as they saw that this is the norm and desired for such things to be part of their

self-created identity. Co-cultural theory (Orbe, 1998a) also plays a role in that it allows the women to make connections with those outside of their co-cultural group, such as women from other countries, women of other faiths, and women of other knowledge and interests.

The concept of skin tone is socially constructed by hegemonic ideologies. As such, it was obvious to the women that diversity was not expressed properly nor was it accepted. They were able to identify instances of racism and colorism from their own lived experiences and from the experiences of others that they interact with. Interestingly, all the women saw a lack of representation and, as Ranna stated, some avoided the dominant group because the dominant group criticized those members. It is important to understand that, although the diversity of the participants created a balance for the study, the perspectives of the women of color versus the lighter skinned women lead to a disparity to their standpoints. Although the lighter skinned women saw that diversity was well represented, the women of color saw a plethora of opportunities for improvement.

Additionally, the interviews revealed that there is a lack of representation of minority groups, within both the Muslim community and the dominant Western society in which these participants live. However, using these online platforms allowed women to break barriers and to form connections with many others that belong to a plethora of different groups. This nourished the idea of increasing awareness of diversity between Muslims. As some of the women shared, minority groups are being uplifted on social media more often as others support them by following, liking, and sharing the content they post online. After recognizing that they do not fit in with the dominant group, many of the women resorted to social media to express themselves and embraced their differences in a variety of ways.

The study's first research question sought to understand how Muslim women use social media as a tool to bridge the gap and connect with other Muslims who stand out in a Western society. The data show that Muslim women naturally seek to connect with others online as it allows them to bond with other individuals that share experiences and opinions similar to their own. By using social media, the women were presented with a wider variety of individuals they can follow and interact with online. It is important to note that the majority of the women listed women of different backgrounds and ethnicities when listing their favorite content creators on social media. Additionally, other women mentioned that they are inspired by the work of activists because it allows them to learn more about who they are and help educate others around them, both on social media and in offline situations.

The study's second research question aimed to understand the perceptions that Muslim women have regarding issues of diversity. The results indicate that depending on who the women were, they understood this concept differently. While some of the women felt that there could be more sympathy between the different groups of Muslim women, other women were able to recognize that their religion does not support cultural ideologies. As the women stated, Islam preaches a compassionate inclusive atmosphere between its members. The data shows that Muslim

women are aware of their differences and, specifically, the participants were able to see how these differences are impacting their relationships with other members in their communities.

### **THEORETICAL INSIGHTS**

Since this study was concerned with how Muslim women communicate on social media as a way to bond with other Muslims, Orbe's (1998a) co-cultural theory was utilized. The theory has three preferred outcomes and three communication approaches. At times, the participants' communication approaches were nonassertive and at others, assertive. As such, the women often engaged in nonassertive behavior in order to separate themselves when they wanted to maintain intercultural barriers. This is seen when the women choose to post content that distinguishes them from the dominant society and associates them with members of co-cultural groups and minorities. Examples of assertive strategies were the woman who was creating YouTube videos that revolve around her experiences with Islam and art or the woman who connects with and posts about her Palestinian background. With issues of race, ethnic background, and skin-color, it is vital to note that none of the women used Orbe's (1998a) aggressive approach. Specifically, the participants did not feel the need to use hurtful expressions against other women, online or offline, nor did they only promote their own cultures and traditions.

Regarding the second theory used, social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) was used in this study to understand how the women came to understand concepts of their faith and to recognize their presence, or the lack of religious values, when interacting with other women. The theory identifies instances of primary and secondary socializations, which the women spoke to indirectly. Specifically, primary socialization mostly consisted of rules, actions, and behaviors that were deemed appropriate, valuable, and respected by their parents and the basic understandings of their faith. An example of this is when Huda said, "Islam teaches us that the Muslim Ummah is equal." This understanding is instilled at a young age by agents of socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966), such as parents, teachers, and elders.

On the other hand, instances of secondary socialization were actions and behaviors that they were exposed to as they began to form their personalities and their identities. This includes situations where they were able to recognize the different behaviors that others espouse compared to the behaviors that they were taught to uphold. Agents of socialization (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) for secondary socialization were found to be local friends and classmates, and users they meet, follow, and interact with on social media. Secondary socializations is where Muslim women realize the differences in values, actions, and rules as demonstrated by secondary agents of socialization.

### **LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH**

This study was not without limitations, specifically, the number of participants recruited for this study and their personal backgrounds. The study only observed the lived experiences of

young Muslim women who were single and still in college. Comparatively, expanding the pool of participants would have benefitted the research in that it would have shed light on how social media use impacts and influences the lives of married Muslim women. Additionally, including older Muslim women in the study would have also provided a better understanding of how Muslim women comprehend diversity as a topic as well as how their perceptions of it have changed throughout their lives. Another limitation is that the participants did not include a larger number of diversity, such as including African American Muslim women, or Asian-Pacific Muslim women, or Latina Muslim women. Having such a varied group of women would have allowed the results to be more inclusive of the lives of Muslim women from across the globe.

These limitations, however, open up many possibilities for future research. Specifically, future research studies could speak with a larger variety of Muslim women who originate from different backgrounds. Moreover, the future studies should not be limited to only women who have lived in the United States. Such studies could gather the lived experiences of international women and compare the influences of diversity on Muslim women's beauty standards, social media use, and their impacts on women in non-Western societies, such as the Arab peninsula, Asia, Africa, or South America. Future studies could also be used to understand how specific groups of Muslims in the US are using social media and how, or if, social media impacts their identities. Such studies could analyze issues of identity-formation, self-presentation online, and social media influence.

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